

NEWSLETTER 1999/2

New exhibition in the prayer hall of the Spanish Synagogue

This year marks the centenary of the infamous Leopold Hilsner Trial. Leopold Hilsner was a Jew from the small Czech town of Polná, who was sentenced to death for involvement in alleged ritual murder. The verdict was confirmed by an appeal court in October of the same year. It was only later that he was granted a reprieve, the death penalty being changed to life imprisonment. Leopold Hilsner was given a general pardon in 1918, almost twenty years later.

The Jewish Museum in Prague has prepared an exhibition, *Murder in Polná*, to mark the anniversary of this event. The exhibition presents a number of interesting period documents and illustrations, which not only clearly reflect the intensified anti-Semitic atmosphere of the trial, but also the attitudes of the then Austrian and Czech society towards the Jewish minority.

The curator of the exhibition, which runs until October 1999, is *Dr. Arno Pařík*.



Unique Jewish Museum acquisition

A rare work was acquired by the Jewish Museum in Prague at the end of 1998: a Passover Haggadah (Haggadah shel Pesach) illustrated manuscript. Although there is no colophon and the author is not as yet known, it can be said with certainty that the manuscript dates from the 18th century. This is attested by the characteristic ornamentation and models used, the binding, and indirectly by the ownership inscriptions on the endpapers.



The manuscript on vellum has 21 folios (196 mm x 160 mm) in 6 gatherings. The Hebrew and Aramaic text of the Passover Haggadah is written in Hebrew square script with instructions in Yiddish *in ze'ena ur'ena* letters and is accompanied by decorative motifs, initials and full- and half-page pen- and ink - illustrations.

The decoration of the title page is copied from the frontispiece of a Passover Haggadah printed in Sulzbach in 1711. The

illustrations of this edition, which are otherwise based on the copperplates of the Amsterdam Haggadah of 1695, were not, however, the only models used by the author of the manuscript. The manuscript contains several other illustrations (e.g. Elijah leads the Messiah riding on a donkey to Jerusalem), which derive from other sources. All the illustrations and initials (e. g. archer, soldier, postillion, musketeer and cherub figures) literally draw from the typical Pesach iconography used in printed exemplars. Naturally, a number of decorative features were added by the author: for example, incipits, which were executed in decorative folded ribbon letters (possibly directly modelled on the Prague machzorim of the 17th century), were flanked by heraldic animals characteristic of Jewish symbolism (deer and griffin) or by floral decoration and rocaille. The author made use of contemporary art styles and sometimes employed folkish forms.

The contemporary binding, which is somewhat atypical for its striking

ornamentation, is a work of art in itself. The parchment cover, which is light brown and cream in colour with complex blind tooling ornamentation, is decorated with coloured cut-out Chinese motifs, which were applied at a later stage.

The manuscript is among the works which were made in the 18th century by Jewish folk scribes and illuminators for wealthy commissioners. This revival of the manuscript tradition initially occurred in Moravia (with the so-called "Moravian Penmen School") and later in Vienna, Berlin and elsewhere. Although it is not as yet possible to locate the origin of this rare Museum acquisition, it is evident from endpaper records and other data that the book belonged to a Moravian Jewish family from Loštice and Olomouc, at least from 1812 to the second half of the 20th century. (*prepared by the curator of manuscripts and rare prints, Olga Sixtová.*)

Origin of the Museum's Library holdings

In this and the next Newsletter issues we would like to familiarise our readers with the basic historical events linked to the founding of the contemporary library of the Jewish Museum in Prague. The following information is based on extensive material prepared by Museum Library staff member *Mgr. Andrea Braunová*.

The Jewish Museum Library contains approximately 100,000 books. These extensive holdings originated and grew in close connection to a number of specific historical events, in particular the Second World War and the post-war development in the former Czechoslovakia. The

Jewish Museum Library is based on the following sources:

- 1) library holdings of the pre-war *Jewish Religious Community*,
- 2) library holdings established within the framework of the wartime *Central Jewish Museum*,
- 3) wartime transfer of books from *Terezín* (Central Bohemia), *Mimoň* and *surrounding districts* (North Bohemia),
- 4) acquisitions (purchases, donations, exchanges),

Jewish Religious Community Library

The Jewish Community (JC) Library was established in 1857 and opened to the public in 1874. Its holdings came from bequests and material left by prominent Prague personages. The predominant means of acquisition later became purchases. In 1938 the JC Library contained around 15,000 books. It was neither part of the pre-war Jewish Museum nor part of the Nazi-established Central Jewish Museum, which came into being after the Library had been seized by the German authorities. According to archive material, the JC Library holdings were kept in the Oriental Seminary of the Prague Law Faculty (then the SS Standartkommandatur). They were later transferred to the Golden Crown Monastery in Southern Bohemia, from where in 1946 they were sent back to the Jewish Museum in Prague.

At present, the Prague Jewish Community Library holdings form part of the Jewish Museum in Prague Library and consist of around 13,000 volumes. Approximately 2,000 books disappeared both during and after the war.

Library holdings of the wartime Central Jewish Museum

From its inception in 1906 until 1939, the Museum was managed by the *Society for the Establishment and Maintenance of a Jewish Museum in Prague*. The Society was dissolved in 1939, after the occupation of Czechoslovakia, and the Museum was transferred to Prague Jewish Community management. The Central Jewish Museum was established in 1942 on the initiative of Jewish Community representatives and only after difficult negotiations with the German authorities. It was not, however, open to the public.

The Central Jewish Museum was established as part of the Prague Jewish Community and consisted of the following items: collections of the pre-war museum, in addition to Prague Jewish Community cultural relics, synagogue objects, books and paintings that had been confiscated by the German authorities from the liquidated Jewish communities of Bohemia and Moravia, and donations and deposits left by individuals. A total of 213,096 items were sorted and registered by May 1945. All items came from the area of the former Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, to be more precise from Jewish owners - institutions or individuals in the Protectorate. Although certain artefacts and books may have originally come from various localities, the fact is that they belonged to people living in this region before the outbreak of the war. Evidence for this is provided by the central card catalogue of the Central Jewish Museum, which indicates the provenance of each item.

According to Jewish Museum material, the library holdings in the Central Jewish Museum mostly consisted of traditional Jewish literature - rabbinic and legal writings in Hebrew, prayer books, scholarly Jewish texts, specialist literature and fiction by Jewish authors. There were very few early prints. (to be continued in issue 3/99)

Regional exhibitions on Jewish themes – Boskovice

The Moravian town of *Boskovice* is situated 170 km south-east of Prague and north of Mikulov, which we featured in the last issue. The earliest written report mentioning the presence of Jews here dates from the 14th century. Along with



Mikulov, Holešov and Třebíč, the Jewish community of Boskovice is one of the largest Jewish communities in Moravia. A major Talmud research centre was also established in this town, where a number of prominent rabbinic authorities were based, such as Samuel ha-Levi Kolon (b. 1724 - d. 1806) and the Frankfurt born Chatam Sofer (1762 - 1839). The Jewish community was revived for a short period after the Second World War, but was later attached to the Jewish community of Brno (the main county town of South Moravia) due to a lack of congregants. As with other Jewish settlements, the demographic development of the Jewish population in Boskovice was influenced by the process of emancipation. While

there were 1,603 Jews living here in 1804 and as many as 1,973 in 1848, there were only 395 in 1900.

Most of the original Jewish quarter, which was developed from the 15th century, has survived to this day intact and is now a heritage preservation area. Of the prominent buildings here should also be mentioned the synagogue, known as *Synagogue Maior*, which took form in 1698 through the complete reconstruction of an existing 16th century building. In the course of many years the synagogue



underwent several alterations. Services were held here until the beginning of the Second World War. During the Nazi occupation it was closed down and used as a storehouse for furniture, clothing and books confiscated by the Nazis from the Jewish inhabitants. After the war the synagogue continued to be used as a storehouse and from the 1960s has been in state ownership.

Following an ambitious reconstruction project in the 1990s, an exhibition on the history of the local Jewish community was installed in the synagogue. A number of synagogue items, dating mostly from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, were loaned by the Jewish Museum in Prague to the exhibition organised by the Boskovice Museum.

Music in the Spanish Synagogue

On 20 March 1999 a concert was given in the Spanish Synagogue by the world renowned cantor *Joseph Malovany*, who was accompanied by the Czech organist *Jaroslav Tůma*. This performance marked the launch of a regular series



entitled *Music in the Spanish Synagogue*, which is organised by the Dana Drtinová music agency. This series includes performances by distinguished classical music performers (soloists and chamber ensembles) from both the



Czech Republic and abroad. The quality of the programme is guaranteed by its being decided upon by a group of leading Czech musicians and music specialists: the harpsichordist Professor *Zuzana Růžičková*, pianist Professor *Ivan Klánský* and Professor *Hana Arie Gaifman*, the organiser of the Musica Judaica music festival.

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For information on how to purchase *Judaica Bohemiae*, you can write to:
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